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ABSTRACT

The University of Central Florida (UCF) has formally recognized distributed learning as a strategic direction to increase access to educational opportunities for students within its service area and beyond. The University has chosen to employ asynchronous learning networks (ALN) as a primary approach to address the challenges of a rapidly-growing student population, a shortage of classroom space, and the need to maintain quality--all within available resources. This paper outlines the UCF model for ALN development and discusses the transition from distance ALN to campus-based ALN instruction. The paper describes faculty development, learner support, program evaluation strategies, and findings used in the implementation of ALN degree programs and courses. (Author/AEF)

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Faculty Development, Learner Support and Evaluation in ALN Programs

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Abstract: The University of Central Florida has formally recognized distributed learning as a strategic direction to increase access to educational opportunities for students within our service area and beyond. The university has chosen to employ asynchronous learning networks (ALN) as a primary approach to address the challenges of a rapidly-growing student population, a shortage of classroom space, and the need to maintain quality--all within available resources. This paper describes faculty development, learner support, and program evaluation strategies and findings used in the implementation of ALN degree programs and courses.

1. Introduction

The University of Central Florida (UCF), one of the most dynamic and rapidly growing institutions in the United States, is quickly developing its capabilities in distributed learning. UCF's metropolitan setting in Orlando, Florida is also one of the fastest-growing regions in the nation, with an established reputation as a premiere tourist destination and as a center for high technology and space-related industrial development. The university is aggressively developing distributed learning programs, particularly asynchronous learning networks (ALN), to meet the diverse needs of its growing student population. UCF has institutionalized distributed learning by developing the technical infrastructure, providing administrative support and leadership, systematic faculty development, learner support, and a plan for ongoing assessment of distributed learning. This panel

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presentation will provide an overview of the institutional approach used to develop distributed learning at UCF focusing on faculty development, assessment for program improvement, and learner support.

2. Administrative and Technical Infrastructure

Over the past two years, UCF has made significant investments in technology infrastructure, faculty and student support services, and organizational development to support both regular campus instruction and the asynchronous learning initiative. The Division of Information Technologies and Resources was formed in 1995, bringing together the Library, Computer Services (academic and administrative computing), Telecommunications, and Instructional Resources into a single administrative unit. The position of Vice Provost for Information Technologies and Resources was created to head this division, which reports to the Provost and Vice President for Academic Affairs. During 1996 a new Distributed Learning Course Development unit was formed to create ALN courses and provide related faculty development support.

In 1997, the Vice Provost for Academic Affairs reorganized his division to create the UCF Center for Distributed Learning. It has full responsibility for planning and administering the university's interactive television and ALN programs. The Center will serve as a clearinghouse for processes and resources in support of off-campus and distributed learning credit programs, courses, and students, as well as marketing for both live and distributed learning courses. It also is providing leadership and coordination for efforts to achieve accreditation for distance learning programs throughout the university.

In addition, the Faculty Center for Teaching and Learning (FCTL) was created and a Director appointed. The FCTL is undertaking campus-wide, faculty-led systemic initiatives to improve the UCF teaching and learning environment.

Informal seminars on instructional uses of the web which highlighted entrepreneurial efforts by individual faculty who piloted web-based courses were organized and fed into the normal planning process of the university. This led to the identification of a model to incorporate the best practices discovered in these seminars into the mainstream activities of the University. The UCF model for ALN development that resulted can be summarized as follows:

1. Needs assessment: Determine the market or audience for courses or programs.
2. Delivery system selection: Based on the student characteristics, select the appropriate delivery mode(s).
3. Planning: Once the market and delivery system have been determined, bring academic leadership into a planning session aided by consultants knowledgeable in the delivery mode to agree upon an implementation plan and to make a commitment of resources to the project.
4. Instructional design: It is imperative that the delivery system incorporate pedagogically sound instructional design.
5. Instructional support team: Assemble an academic support team that includes faculty, technical experts and support staff.
6. Faculty development program: The faculty who will develop the courses are provided release time, multimedia computers, course templates and software and assistance in workshops and one-on-one in developing their courses.
7. Learner support system: Systems are implemented on-line and by phone to provide students access to library materials, admissions, financial aide, registration and advisement.
8. Pilot phase: The courses that are designed in the course development project are implemented with full support from the instructional support team beginning with a course orientation and including summative and formative evaluation of the course.
9. Demonstration phase: Once the courses are developed, departments begin development of full-scale program offerings. On a long-range basis, colleges assume responsibility for faculty and course support.
10. Implementation: The collegial processes for course and program approval and establishment of accreditation documentation end the planning and development stages. This is followed by marketing of the programs and courses to the intended audience.
11. Evaluation: The evaluation will assess the implications of ALN for teaching and learning at UCF by examining: 1) The impact of distributed learning on faculty instructional practices, and 2) the impact of ALN on student learning processes

3. The Transition from Distance ALN to Campus-Based ALN Instruction

In the periodic feedback sessions conducted by the project staff, faculty teaching fully web-based courses often remarked that it appeared to them that many of the students in their web courses were concurrently enrolled in traditional courses offered on campus. An examination of the students' transcripts revealed that 325 of the 424 students (unduplicated headcount) enrolled in the web-based courses had been previously enrolled at the university (or 76% of the total enrollment in web courses). Indeed, only 60 students had not previously been enrolled at the university and took courses only on the web for Fall 96 and Spring 97 and 99 students were enrolled in only a web-based course for both semesters. These data reveal that the audience for web-based courses is primarily currently enrolled UCF students who were concurrently enrolled in traditional courses. Of the 99 students who were taking only web-based courses, 63 had not declared a major and 23 majored in Education.

This analysis led to a recommendation by the project leaders to pilot a new campus-based ALN approach to instruction that would focus on currently-enrolled UCF students. The deans accepted this recommendation, and the Provost agreed to fund a pilot project for ALN enhancement of campus based courses that would address three goals:

1. Enhance classroom productivity by using a combination of ALN and synchronous course delivery. For example, a course which normally meets three hours a week, would meet only once a week, with the remainder of course content delivered over the web.
2. Improve the quality of large-classroom instruction by enhancing interactively with ALN techniques.
3. Enhance the retention (or completion rates) in courses that traditionally have low student success by using ALN techniques to increase student-student and student-instructor interaction, providing automated tutorials and monitoring student progress using ALN techniques.

In the late Spring of 1997 a Request for Proposals was issued to solicit proposals from faculty and eleven projects were funded with all colleges involved. In addition, the deans of two colleges agreed to fund an additional three courses in the project. A faculty development workshop was held in July and the first courses in the pilot were offered in the Fall of 1997.

4. Processes and Strategies

Within less than two years, UCF has come from having no coordinated ALN program to having more than 200 fully on-line and substantially Web-enhanced courses, and numerous others that make significant use of the Web. Having observed the successes resulting from the initial round of on-line courses, our colleges have reaffirmed their commitments to continue and expand on-line offerings.

Expedited planning and decision making has been a characteristic of our ALN program from the beginning. Elements that have made this possible include obtaining the commitment of the university's senior administrators, from the President through the college Deans; working with faculty in cohort groups, providing central coordinated course development support; the use of distance learning advisory committees with broad participation from the colleges and branch campuses; a strong working partnership between the course development group and the Division of Information Technologies and Resources, whose units provide technical infrastructure and support for the on-line programs; and the use of a nationally-recognized consultant, who worked with our Deans and planning groups to shape our policies and directions. These working partnerships continue to be refined and cultivated.

Throughout this process, we have sought to develop and refine our ALN activities as models. These models include:

1. A pedagogical model. All of UCF's ALN courses utilize an educationally sound structure based on the prototype developed by Sorg and Truman. This model has been continually enhanced as new tools and techniques have become available.
2. A planning model. Distance learning is a dynamic activity, and the institution must have an equally dynamic planning process. As discussed above, we have developed a highly effective and cordial planning process that has facilitated the rapid development and deployment of on-line courses and programs.
3. A course development model. Based on the work of Sorg and Truman, and with the input of faculty who have participated in earlier course development activities, a course development and support structure has

been put in place that forms a close collaboration between the individual faculty members and the course development group.

4. A delivery model. A close working partnership has been formed between the on-line program and the Division of Information Technologies and Resources (which includes Course Development and Web Services, the Library, Computer Services, Telecommunications, and Instructional Resources). This collaboration has resulted in extensive improvements to the campus infrastructure to facilitate faculty and student participation in these courses. Examples include the dedication of a Web server to ALN course delivery and substantial expansion of the campus modem pool.

5. Faculty Development

Interactive faculty and course development workshops were held in July 1996 and in September-October 1996. During the summer, faculty were expected to attend five, three-hour workshops. Critical technical skills were handled on an individual basis based on need. Distance learning technologies were used and modeled. Course Development Web pages were created with photographs both posed and candid shots of participating faculty. Links were made to all the Web content handouts, computer conferencing forum, Web page generator and forms for supplying feedback.

One of the greatest needs for systematic faculty development in developing Web-based courses is the need for faculty to prepare themselves for their change in role from lecturer to facilitator. Another consideration in the quality of designing a distance course is the faculty member's ability to relate to students. Therefore, initial faculty development workshops included: understanding the philosophy of distance learning, dealing with copyright, adapting teaching strategies, designing interactive courseware, identifying learner characteristics, organizing instructional resources for independent study, using telecommunications systems, collaborative planning and decision making, and evaluating student achievement and perceptions.

Institutionalizing faculty development for ALN course instruction has provided cross discipline sharing of teaching techniques and has produced cohorts of faculty across all five colleges who continue to meet and discuss the teaching and learning process and evaluate their successes and failures. The faculty development process has evolved to a model ALN 'course' approach. Faculty members are exposed to the tools and processes used in teaching ALN courses through a combination of asynchronous activities and through presentations by and discussions with faculty experienced in teaching ALN courses. Instructional design is an integral part of faculty development providing all faculty with the tools needed to reengineer existing courses or develop new courses for delivery on the World Wide Web.

The processes used in systematic course and faculty development have enabled the support of many faculty and courses while maintaining quality. Course developers act as change agents to facilitate model and process building across disciplines for faculty with varying levels of technological ability and experience. A cultural change is encouraged among faculty through the development of faculty cohorts that transform the teaching and learning process through collaborative, experiential learning, and modeling ALN principles such as learning communities.

High quality course materials are created through a team that consists of subject matter experts (faculty), instructional designers, programmers, and graphic artists. Course development staff work directly with faculty to provide a professional model for building course materials. With this approach, faculty members are not required to possess knowledge of HTML programming or multimedia production. They are supported so that they may concentrate on teaching and learning in ALN courses.

Learner support materials and processes have been and are being developed so that distance learning students may have access to the same support services available to on-campus students. Faculty are prepared through the faculty development program to provide essential learner support. They develop course operational protocols that provide learners with a consistent and understandable ALN environment, intervention strategies designed to help individual and groups of learners. The university is moving rapidly to provide all students with electronic access to all campus services, admission, registration, tutoring, and advising.

6. Evaluation of ALN Programs

In an effort to determine the impact of online courses on both faculty and students, UCF began a pilot study in 1997 to examine teaching and learning in the ALN environment. This evaluation project will focus on assessing the implications of ALN for teaching and learning at UCF by examining:

1. the demographics of students who enroll in ALN courses;
2. the perceptions of students who have enrolled in ALN courses;
3. the perceptions of faculty toward the experience of teaching in an ALN setting;
4. the impact of ALN on faculty instructional practices; and
5. the impact of ALN on student learning processes.

To date, this pilot work has focused only on those courses that have been offered entirely in ALN mode with no face-to-face meetings beyond an orientation on the first day and perhaps a final examination. Data from ALN-enhanced format courses are currently being examined.

Preliminary data collection and analysis indicate a high level of satisfaction by students regarding their on-line course experiences. Students, who tend to be older than traditional college age, are working full time and pursuing their course work on a part-time basis report that saving driving time by not driving to campus as the primary reason for taking on-line courses.

Faculty report a high degree of satisfaction teaching on-line courses. At the same time they confirm our beliefs that teaching on-line courses takes more time than traditional courses. They report that in spite of the work involved, they are reinvigorated by the experience and will continue to teach on-line courses.

7. Summary

Support for distributed learning from the highest levels of university administration has provided an environment in which on-line courses and degree programs are developing rapidly. Faculty and students are fully supported by free access to the technical infrastructure and by qualified professional personnel and talented students. The human infrastructure has been key to the university's successful venture into enhancing student educational opportunities through learning on-line.